

Early English Learning: Theory and Practice

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1. Introduction

Governments around the world seem to be either introducing English language instruction into primary school or lowering the starting age. In Turkey, a significant education reform plan was implemented and English became a mandatory subject from grade 4 in 2007. In Vietnam, English instruction was introduced in 2003 as an elective subject for children in grades 3-5, and became a compulsory subject in 2011 starting in grade 3. In Latvia, English started from grade 4 in 2007 and a new reform plan is proceeding stating that children start English as a compulsory subject at age 7 in 2013-2014 (Murphy, 2014). The move to introduce English language teaching to young learners represents a truly global phenomenon and presumably one of the world's biggest policy developments in education. Therefore it is necessary to examine some of the major research literature investigating English language instruction at primary level.

In response to the global phenomenon, the demand for starting English language education at elementary school is increasing in Japan, too. In 2014, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and

Technology (MEXT) issued a proposal named “English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization”. The plan states that third and fourth graders start English language activity classes once or twice a week to nurture basic English communication skills, while fifth and sixth graders start learning English as a mandatory subject three times a week to nurture basic English language skills. The reform plan indicates that English becomes a subject at elementary school for the first time in Japan. The global phenomenon and the reform plan seem to have accelerated the demand among parents for early English learning, and more and more children start learning English at earlier ages in Japan. However the theoretical effects of early English learning, and how it should be executed, don’t seem to have been considered. This paper focuses on providing holistic theory for early English learning and some practical teaching methods in Japan.

2. The age issue

There is the widely held belief among societies and parents that starting English learning earlier leads children to a higher level of competence in English. Critical period hypotheses are often used by the proponents of early English education. The concept of a “critical period” in Second Language Acquisition has been researched in many studies. Lenneberg (1967) states that there is a critical period for learning a language, and it is prior to puberty when right and left hemisphere lateralization reaches the adult level. He argues that automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a language seems to disappear after puberty. In addition, a number of researchers have affirmed that there is a limit around puberty, when acquiring a second language to native levels becomes impossible. Scovel (1988) insists that children after the age of 12 don’t acquire phonologically authentic pronunciation of a second language. Long (1990) states that native-like accent is impossible to acquire after puberty

and also claims that the acquisition of second language morphology and syntax to native levels becomes unattainable without exposure to the second language before age 15. However, the majority of this research has been conducted in situations where the second language is in the active use within the community, which is not applicable to Japan where English is mainly taught in the classroom. Children don't have sufficient amount of input in a foreign language learning environment and correlation between ages and the acquisition rate in foreign language learning is very different from second language learning.

Studies on the acquisition of English as a foreign language were carried out in some countries. For example, Munoz (2006) investigated the classroom in Spain where various ages (8, 11, 14 and 18 years old) of students learn English as a foreign language and found that older starters more successfully scored than younger ones except for aural perception. Garcia Mayo and Garcia Lecumberri (2003) studied the effect of age on English language learning as a foreign language, and concluded that the notion of 'younger is better' is not substantiated in a context where the language is taught as a subject and where the learners' exposure to the language is largely restricted the school context.

However, despite these studies arguing that early learners in a foreign language learning environment don't have advantages, there are also studies that argue younger starters have an advantage. For example, Pinter (2011) argues that high-quality input and teaching indicates a possible advantage of younger over older learners. The eight-year project in Croatia found that earlier learners were significantly better at pronunciation, orthography, and vocabulary than older starters. It suggests that the most important variables for successful early English learning are the quality of the input and teaching. Ensuring high-quality educational resources makes English learning process in young learners effective (Murphy, 2014).

3. Second Language Acquisition: L1 transfer in pronunciation

Many studies have shown that earlier is usually better as far as the pronunciation of an L2 is concerned. Both the proportion of individuals observed to speak their L2 with an accent, as well as the strength of foreign accents among individuals have been found to increase as the age of learning an L2 increases (Oyama, 1976; Flege and Fletcher, 1992). Pronunciation is the area where an L1 transfer is the strongest in Second Language Acquisition (Shirai, 2008). Flege et al. (1995) found that the age of learning (AOL) exerts a powerful influence on their pronunciation even though the subjects had spoken English for many years, and that some native speakers detected foreign accent in the subjects who began learning at the very young age of three.

Riken (2010) compared 14 month-old French and Japanese children to investigate how they hear sounds with and without consonant clusters and found that Japanese children could not distinguish the differences because they insert illusionary vowels while listening to consonant clusters. The study shows that it is caused by the substantial differences in phonological systems between English and Japanese languages, and indicates that 14-month-old Japanese children have already acquired the Japanese language phonological system even though they have not been able to read Japanese letters.

Kuhl et al. (2001) states that babies are taking ‘statistics’ regarding what sounds are used and spoken while they are listening to their mothers. They claimed that because there are hardly any English /r/, /l/ sounds in Japanese and the Japanese /r/ is very different from the English /r/, /l/, Japanese babies absorb Japanese /r/ sounds and discard English /r/, /l/ sounds. Therefore, Japanese 12-month-old babies only perceived 50% of English /l/, /r/ sounds.

In addition, Oiwa and Akatsuka (2011) report that Japanese elementary school children have difficulties in distinguishing /l/ from /r/, and /v/ from /b/ and that listening practices don’t enable the children to tell the differences in

English sounds which don't exist in Japanese. They suggest that it is necessary to explicitly teach how to pronounce English sounds which are not present in Japanese.

Further, Ehri et al. (2001) argue that it is important to consider whether English is the first or the second language for children because they acquire different phonological systems depending on their first language. They state that the explicit pronunciation practices are necessary for some phonemes in English which don't exist in children's first language.

4. Phonological awareness

In English speaking countries, it has been an important issue how to increase children's literacy since children whose first language is not English or who are socially disadvantaged have difficulties acquiring early literacy. Many studies have found a positive association between phonological awareness and the acquisition of literacy, and the children who received phonological awareness training scored significantly higher on reading tasks than those who did not have the training (Adames, 1990; Seymour & Evans, 1994; Mann & Foy, 2003; Grant, 2013). Ehri et al. (2001) state that phonemic awareness instruction makes a statistically significant contribution to reading acquisition for various types of children. They found that phonemic awareness instruction was more effective when it was taught with letters than without letters. On the other hand, significant correlations were found between measures of phonological awareness and letter knowledge (letter names and letter sounds), and between letter knowledge and reading. Letter knowledge is a strong predictor of reading and facilitates phonological awareness skills, and children who learn letter sounds quickly are more likely to make a greater progress in reading (Blaiklock, 2004; Foy & Man, 2006). On the other hand, English is one of the languages that have different letter names and sounds, and it is important to know both the sounds

and the letter names. Grant (2013) conducted a longitudinal study for first year students and found that the use of a synthetic phonics program was shown to give them a flying start with their reading, writing and spelling, and it reduced special educational needs across the schools.

5. Synthetic phonics

Synthetic phonics is a way of teaching children to read and write by instructing how to connect each sound to a letter. Synthetic phonics means to synthesize, or blend, individual speech sound (phoneme) to constitute a word. When children learn synthetic phonics, they link letters to sounds and then blend these sounds together to read words. They separate (segment) words into their constituent sounds and connect these sounds to letters in order to write them. In a synthetic phonics instruction, children start by learning the sound (phoneme) which a letter represents. Johnston and Watson (2005) compared primary children's literacy rates by dividing them into three groups, and giving them different learn-to-read methods. They found that the children who learnt to read using synthetic phonics performed much better than those who learnt through other methods.

6. Phoneme and phonemic awareness

A phoneme is the smallest unit of speech sounds, and the ability to recognize a phoneme is essential to learn synthetic phonics because it is an explicit instruction on how to connect a phoneme to a letter or letters. However, it can be difficult for Japanese children to recognize phonemes of English speech sounds because Japanese language structure is different from English. Inagaki et al. (2000) argue that Japanese children develop mora awareness and dominantly segment words by mora as they learn to read Japanese *kana* letters. Allen (2012) states that learning phonics would be arduous for Japanese children who

cannot distinguish phonemes because it would be just memorizing the letter and sound rules. Therefore, it is necessary to raise phonemic awareness and to have the ability to recognize phonemes for Japanese children before they start to learn phonics.

Phonemic awareness means the ability to distinguish the word which has a different sound from others. For example, to detect the word which has an odd word-front sound among “rain, red, leg, rag” is one phonemic awareness skill. Phonemic awareness can be raised by some training. Manipulating phonemes in various words, such as subtracting a phoneme of /s/ from a word “swing” and recognizing what a word it becomes (wing) is good training. Noticing a word without the targeted phoneme is another effective training method: for example, when a phoneme of /b/ is the target, teachers say “bed, bear, book, pen”, and children grab an eraser when they hear “pen” because the word “pen” does not have the targeted phoneme /b/. In addition, having affluent input using songs and stories in English raises children’s phonemic awareness.

7. Practice 1: Songs

Input oriented instructions have better effect on early English learning. Campfield and Murphy (2013) found that young Polish children who learnt English as a foreign language through nursery rhymes with salient prosodic contours had higher metalinguistic knowledge of word order than those who learnt it with the same prose with no rhymes. They suggest the prosodic ‘bootstrapping’ hypothesis, a hypothesis that children use the prosodic contours of their L1 to help them learn their L1, is relevant to young English learners who have input through nursery rhymes. Using songs for early English learning is not only enjoyable but also beneficial and effective, and it is good to use songs as a sign to start a class, to change the activities, and to have repetitive input in a foreign language learning setting for young learners.

8. Practice 2 : synthetic phonics instruction (phonics)

In this section, synthetic phonics instruction (hereafter, phonics) for Japanese children is discussed. Yamami (2016) investigated the effectiveness of teaching phonics to Japanese fifth and sixth graders in English learning classes, and found that children became more interested in letters and reading books after learning phonics intensively. The study indicates that children find learning letters more interesting than difficult, and that their motivation to learn English is increased. It is important to clarify the sounds which don't exist in the Japanese language and to show how they are different, and to include specific pronunciation instruction for the sounds in phonics instruction. First, many English vowel sounds aren't found in Japanese, and they are the most difficult and then essential for Japanese to learn. There are only five vowels in Japanese whereas there are 15 vowels in American English (Goodwin, 2001). Studies show that Japanese people's pronunciation for vowels of [æ],[a:],[ʌ],[ɔ:],[ou] and r-colored vowels are most problematic to understand. Second, consonants of [r], [l], [ð], [θ], [f], [v] don't exist in Japanese, and they are the most difficult consonants to pronounce for Japanese (Kashiwagi & Snyder, 2008). Aspiration for [p],[t],[k] of word front consonants don't occur in Japanese and they are important for intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000). Third, while there are many consonant clusters in English, there are hardly any in Japanese. Inserting an extra vowel between consonant clusters is a problematic feature of the Japanese speaker of English influenced by the Japanese phonological system (Riken, 2010).

This phonics instruction has been conducted in one private English school located in a residential area of a city in central Japan. Classes meet once a week for sixty minutes and all of them are taught by the author (Japanese English teacher). There are four to five children in one class, and phonics instruction consists 10 minutes of a 60 minute lesson. To start phonics, 26 alphabet letter

(a-z) sounds are introduced. Using 5-6 letters and their sounds each time for ten minutes is effective. Five to six letters and their sounds are introduced by using alphabet letter cards and demonstrating the sound the letter represents. The letter sounds for “a-z” go as follows; a[æ], b[b], c[k], d[d], e[e], f[f], g[g], h[h], i[i], j[dʒ], k[k], l[l], m[m], n[n], o[a], p[p], q[k], r[r], s[s], t[t], u[ʌ], v[v], w[w], x[ks], y[j], z[z]. The vowel [æ] for “a”, [a] for “o”, and [ʌ] for “u” need specific instruction referring to the differences from Japanese vowels, especially the differences in the shape of the mouth. It is necessary to open a mouth wider to pronounce English vowels. Consonants of [l] and [r] require explicit instruction how to produce the sounds by focusing on differences from Japanese R sounds because the Japanese language doesn’t have English [l], [r] and Japanese R is a totally different sound. Pronouncing consonants of [p], [t], [k] need more air than Japanese p, t, k sounds. Instruction to put children’s hands in front of their mouths and to feel the air while they pronounce English [p], [t], [k] is effective. Other sounds are for the letters “c” and “s” (“c” has [s] in “city” and “voice”, and “g” has [dʒ] in “gym” and “giraffe”). In addition to 26 letter sounds, digraphs which represent one sound with two letters need to be included since there are also sounds which don’t exist in Japanese. Digraphs are as follows: th[θ], th[ð], sh[ʃ], ch[tʃ], ck[k], ng[ŋ], ph[f]. Explicit instruction of how to make [θ] and [ð] and how they are different from Japanese sounds are important.

It is also essential to learn how to say letter names and recognize them. Letter knowledge facilitates phonological awareness skills and progresses reading. The letter names needed to pronounce are as follows: A a[ei], B b[bi:], C c[si:], D d[di:], E e[i:], F f[ef], G g[dʒi:], H h[eɪf], I i[ai], J j[dʒei], K k[kei], L l[el], M m[em], N n[en], O o[ou], P p[pi:], Q q[kju:], R r[a:r], S s[es], T t[ti:], U u[ju:], V v[vi:], W w[dʌblju:], X x[eks], Y y[wai], and Z z[zi:]. Letter names of “a” and “o” are different from Japanese sounds and not using Japanese

sounds to pronounce [ei] and [ou] are necessary.

While children learn the letter names and sounds, they can start blending and making words. For example, teachers say [s] and children take a letter card of “s” and teachers say [ʌ] and children take a letter card of “u” and when teachers say [n] and children take a letter card of “n”. It can be difficult to distinguish [ʌ] from [æ], and children often make a word of “san” instead of “sun”. Teachers need to pronounce the vowels precisely. Children pick the letter cards and blend the sound to make words, and they start to read words by themselves. After repeatedly blending the sound and making various three-letter words, bingo games are introduced. In bingo games, students write nine three-letter words out of 15 designated three-letter words. It can be done in a group, and each student says one word taking turns. It is important to instruct them to speak louder and not to add an extra vowel when they say a word.

Phonics is for children to be able to read and write, and reading books is a great way to underline reading skills. Reading basal readers in early English learning is effective not only to enhance the ability to confirm phonics skills but also to motivate children to learn and read more. Children find it fascinating to be able to read books in English. What is more, English words have many tricky words which don't follow phonics rules. By encountering words in books repeatedly, children accumulate and acquire those words. Sight Word Readers (Scholastics) and Springboard Graded Readers (Macmillan) were introduced (Yamami, 2016) and children reported that reading books was very enjoyable, and they wanted to read more and more.

9. Practice 3: International projects

English learning in a foreign language environment is more successful, if 1) English learning policy is supported by schools and parents, 2) support is in place for teachers, 3) quality materials are accessible and 4) there are

sufficient out-of-class opportunities to use English. Murphy (2014) argues that there should be wider participation in international projects, exchanges between schools and children to provide opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. There are scarcely any chances to use English among Japanese, and creating adequate out-of-class opportunities to use English is necessary and important. International projects such as exchanging video letters, or written letters between children in different countries create authentic needs and motivation to use English among children. Guests or teachers from different countries to classroom can create ample opportunities to use English. Children learn not only language but also different cultures.

10. Conclusion

Early English learners by no means acquire English easily and effortlessly. Successful early English learning is determined by various factors including individual learner characteristics, quality of and support for teaching, as well as exposure to English learning outside of the classroom setting. This is not to say starting to learn English early is misguided, and there is much evidence that early English learning has benefits. It has positive influences on inter-cultural knowledge as well as having positive impacts on developing L1 skills and raising language awareness. It can also provide a solid foundation on which English learning can develop when children become older and can apply their more advanced explicit learning mechanisms. English learning is not one process which can be completed in the early ages, but a life-long process which continues to develop and expand throughout life.

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